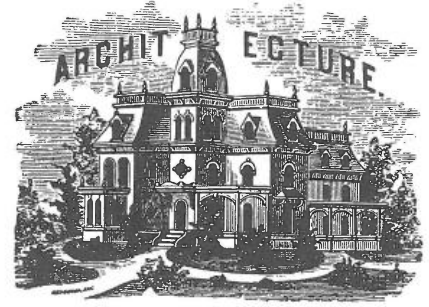


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Alexander Parris
1780-1852

Alexander Parris's reputation as an architect and engineer of major importance in the history of American architecture is largely a reflection of his work in Boston from 1815 until his death in 1852. What has often been overlooked are the fruits of the remarkable career Parris pursued in Portland from 1801 to 1809. His association with Maine continued after his departure with work at the Portsmouth Navy Yard in Kittery and designs for several lighthouses.

Alexander Parris was born on November 24, 1780, at Halifax, Massachusetts, but was soon taken to what is now Hebron, Maine, where family members were area pioneers.¹ After the death of his father in 1783, the family moved to Pembroke, Massachusetts, where Parris grew up. At sixteen he was apprenticed to a builder, Noah Bonney. Parris must have been a precocious student, for he is credited with building a house on his own at eighteen and by his twenty-first

birthday was plying his trade with great success in Portland.²

Parris has been referred to as the first practicing architect in Maine. This is a misleading designation. His training was that of a carpenter or joiner. Contemporary documents³ refer to him as a housewright by profession, and as such he appears as a member of the Portland Housewrights Association in their rules published in 1805.⁴ That year the Town of Portland paid Parris \$200 for constructing butchers stalls in its market house,⁵ a task not usually associated with the careers of such architects of the period as Charles Bulfinch or Benjamin Latrobe. Only in the case of St. John's Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire of 1807 can Parris be documented as functioning as an architect in the modern sense of providing plans and, perhaps, supervision to an undertaking in which he acted in no way as contractor or workman.⁶

What set Parris apart from his brother housewrights was his amazing facility for drawing. Portfolios of his Portland work preserved at the Boston Athenaeum and the American Antiquarian Society reveal a technique far above the rudimentary diagrams that sufficed for most of the era's building projects. Not only is the quality of Parris's material outstanding, but the quantity as well. Many executed projects comprise extensive sets of drawings, often presented with alternate schemes. Other designs for ambitious projects that were never built also survive as examples of Parris's capabilities, suggesting that he was ready to play the part of the professional architect before that profession can really be said to exist.

While the mechanics of Parris's architectural education are hazy, it is evident from his choice of motifs as well as his method of presentation that he was familiar with such British and American publications as the works of William Pain and Asher Benjamin; works, no doubt, assiduously perused at an early age, reflecting a life-long commitment to professional self-improvement.⁷ The chronology of his Portland work also shows Parris to have been a discriminating observer of the contemporary work of Charles Bulfinch in Boston and Samuel McIntire in Salem. A study of his floorplans, in particular, reveals Parris's mastery of the sensitive adjustments of convenience and effect that characterize New England's Federal architecture at its most sophisticated.



Figure 1. Joseph Holt Ingraham House, Portland, c. 1910 view (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

The Portland that Parris came to in 1801 had emerged from the Post-Revolutionary era as one of the busiest ports on the Atlantic coast. By 1800 its newly-rich mercantile elite were demonstrating their enthusiasm and means to rehouse themselves and their businesses in a manner far more ambitious than had hitherto prevailed. In his nine years in Portland, Parris can be documented to have built three single houses and a duplex, while another three or four houses are strong candidates for attribution. He designed the Portland Bank in 1806 and may have previously built an even more extensive commercial row. In 1807 he provided plans for St. John's Church in Portsmouth and the next year supervised the erection of two forts in Portland Harbor. These projects gave the young Parris valuable experience in the various branches of the building trades and set the pattern for the manifold aspects of his later career.

By his own admission, Parris "commenced house-building in early life",⁸ and as such, domestic work loomed largest in his Portland years. His first documented house was for Joseph Holt Ingraham on the newly-laid out State Street in 1801, described by a later

owner as "planned and built by the celebrated architect, Mr. Paris [sic] of Boston".⁹ (Figure 1) This, along with the equally ambitious Matthew Cobb House on Congress Square of the same year, long attributed to Parris but undocumented,¹⁰ were conspicuous advertisements of his talents. Together the Ingraham and Cobb Houses introduced large-scale applied classical orders to Portland's architecture, and both featured at the second floor level a modified Palladian window (sidelights but no arched center) that became a staple motif of local builders throughout the Federal period. The Ingraham House took top honors for elaborate fenestration, however, by being additionally supplied with an arched window centered in its third story.

Both houses had prototypes, the Ingraham House being modelled on the Salem mansion of Elias Hasket Derby (1799) by McIntire; while the Cobb House resembled houses on the north side of Bulfinch's Franklin Place in Boston (1794-96) as well as the John Pierce House in Portsmouth (1799). Of the two, the Cobb House was a more coherent design with its pilasters embracing three central bays of its facade supported on an arched base rather than being strung across the

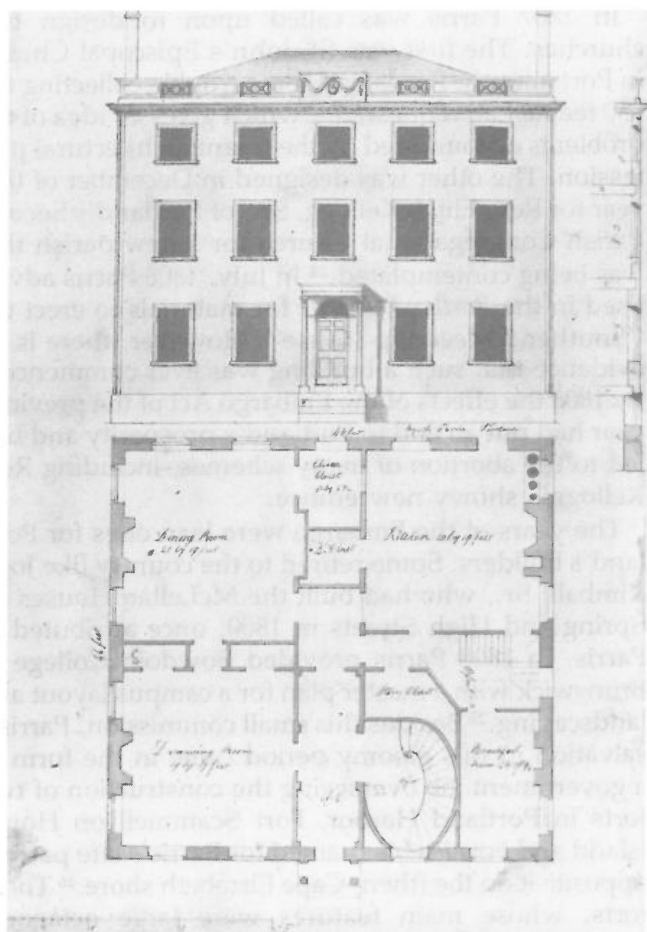


Figure 2. Elevation and floor plan of the Richard Hunnewell House, Portland, by Alexander Parris, 1805 (Courtesy of Boston Athenaeum).

entire width with no projection below as in the Ingraham House. The Cobb House with its prominent location was widely admired. Local historian William Gould recalled that in his childhood:

...Corinthian pilasters reached nearly to the eaves, with carved capitals making it more elegant than any private house I had ever seen. Its unsullied white front with no sign of joint or seam, gave it the appearance of being cut from a solid block of marble...¹¹

Such elaborate exterior treatments were not followed to any great extent in Portland's domestic architecture with the exception of the house that Asa Clapp, Cobb's business partner, remodelled on Congress Street in 1804-05. Another attribution to Parris,¹² the Clapp House boasted a florid facade of superimposed pilasters, Doric below with a diminutive Corinthian order against the third story. Inside an elliptical staircase rose to a cupola, both presumably the first of their respective types locally. The front portico with its pairs of alternated columns and bowed entablature survives along with the doorcase in the collection of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in Boston. Clapp's account books contain no reference to Parris among the many craftsmen involved with the

remodelling.¹³ Parris's contribution, if any, must have been in the planning and not in the execution.

Prior to 1805, there is only one other house that can reasonably be assigned to Parris, the large brick dwelling that lawyer John Park Little, newly removed from Portland, built on Main Street in Gorham about 1804. The fenestration of its facade was nearly identical to that of the Ingraham House, without the overlay of classical detail, and closely resembles a surviving drawing by Parris.¹⁴

In 1802 ropemaker Neal Shaw erected a brick house on State Street in Portland for which another Parris drawing may relate.¹⁵ However, there is no good evidence for the Shaw House's original appearance prior to an 1850s remodelling. Another undocumented Parris attribution is the severe brick house that merchant Robert Boyd built on High Street in 1805, now St. Elizabeth's Home. Most of its interiors have been altered with the exception of the extraordinary groined-vaulted ceiling of the entrance hall similar to the one planned for another Parris-built house of that year, the Richard Hunnewell House on State Street (Figure 2).

The Hunnewell House of 1805 and the Commodore Edward Preble House designed the next year are Parris's best documented domestic works.¹⁶ Both show a determined effort to break away from the established central hall plan. The Hunnewell House had a short entrance hall with an elliptical staircase set off to one side in its own compartment. The Preble House had a side-entry plan with the front of the house on the principal story given over to two inter-connecting parlors. A rear ell contained the kitchen and a library. Both exteriors were extremely restrained in their detailing. The only unusual feature on the outside of the Preble House was the central window of the first floor, which was a "dummy" behind which was centered the partition separating the parlors. Both houses had roof balustrades which featured a raised central panel. That at the Hunnewell House is different from the one that shows in Parris's drawing but may be original. The rest of the Hunnewell House inside and out has been thoroughly remodelled, most completely in 1923 when it assumed its present use as the Portland Club. The Preble House was finished after Commodore Preble's death in 1807 and was remodelled in 1859-60 as the Preble House Hotel which was demolished in 1924.

In 1803 Parris designed what was undoubtedly the first duplex in Portland for merchant-partners Thomas Hovey and Jonathan Stevens on Free Street, an arrangement that was to prove exceedingly popular throughout the nineteenth century. Along with the duplex, another new building type Parris attempted to introduce was the row house. A plan for a group of eight attached houses dated 1806 survives, but there is no evidence that they were built.¹⁷

Allied to his building of houses, Parris erected barns and stables. Designs for the latter exist for the Hovey-Stevens, Hunnewell, and Preble Houses. In 1805 Parris designed and built a highly ornamental barn for James Deering at his suburban estate, for which he paid \$445.33.¹⁸ Remodelled as a gymnasium in 1948, this

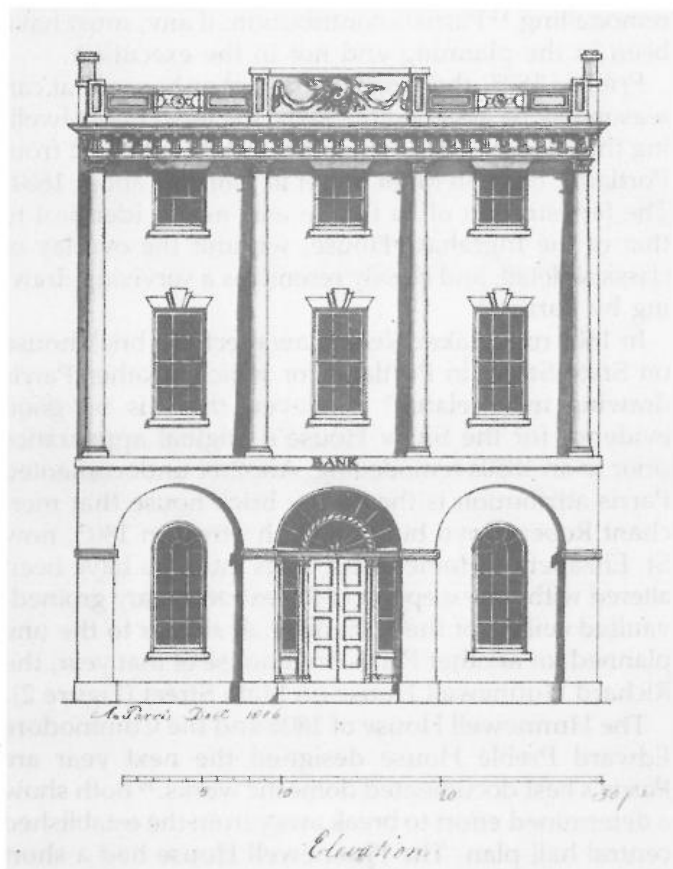


Figure 3. Elevation of the Portland Bank by Alexander Parris, 1806 (Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society, Worcester).

unique survivor of Parris's work was demolished by the University of Maine in 1969.

The success Parris enjoyed in the domestic sphere undoubtedly paved the way for the commercial and public commissions he received in Portland. In 1803-04 the Maine Fire and Marine Insurance Company built a row of five stores on Fish (now Exchange) Street.¹⁹ The central unit featured a facade of fluted Doric pilasters supporting a triangular pediment as well as a modified Palladian window, all suggestive of Parris's hand but without documentation. The Portland Bank on Middle Street, designed in 1806,²⁰ was similar to the Insurance Company Block but with an arcaded base, engaged columns, and a horizontal parapet. (Figure 3). Described as "the best building for business purposes that had been built"²¹ locally, its interior was ingeniously arranged with top-lit stair wells and a semi-circular rear elevation, a feature again shared with the Insurance Company Block. Originally the bank was flat-roofed with a supposedly watertight mixture of pine tar and gravel, an early and not entirely successful instance of Parris's interest in advanced construction techniques; but as "it did not answer the purpose intended...a higher shingle roof was built over it."²² Both buildings perished in the Great Fire of 1866, although the curved rear elevation of the Insurance Company survived to be incorporated into the present building on the site.

In 1807 Parris was called upon to design two churches. The first was St. John's Episcopal Church in Portsmouth. Parris had some trouble collecting the \$50 fee he had requested,²³ which gives an idea of the problems encountered by the infant architectural profession. The other was designed in December of that year for Rev. Elijah Kellogg, Sr., of Portland's Second Parish Congregational Church for a new parish that was being contemplated.²⁴ In July, 1808 Parris advertised in the *Portland Gazette* for materials to erect the "Southend Meeting-House". However, there is no evidence that such a building was ever commenced. By 1808 the effects of the Embargo Act of the previous year had put an end to Portland's prosperity and had led to the abortion of many schemes, including Rev. Kellogg's showy new edifice.

The years of the Embargo were lean ones for Portland's builders. Some retired to the country like John Kimball, Sr., who had built the McLellan Houses on Spring and High Streets in 1800, once attributed to Parris. In 1808 Parris provided Bowdoin College in Brunswick with a master plan for a campus layout and landscaping.²⁵ Besides this small commission, Parris's salvation in this gloomy period came in the form of a government job overseeing the construction of two forts in Portland Harbor, Fort Scammell on House Island and Fort Preble (named for Parris's late patron) opposite it on the (then) Cape Elizabeth shore.²⁶ These forts, whose main features were large octagonal wooden blockhouses, would lead to many military commissions for Parris, including extensive work at the navy yards in Charlestown, Massachusetts; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and Norfolk, Virginia.

Parris left Portland in 1809. After an interval in Boston, he was in Richmond, Virginia, before serving as a captain of a company of "artificiers" during the War of 1812. Returning to Boston by 1815, Parris pursued a career that is well known through such surviving works as St. Paul's Church (now Cathedral) of 1819, Fanuel Hall Market of 1824-26, and in Quincy, the Unitarian Church known as "Adam's Temple" of 1828. His efforts in conjunction with the erection of the Bunker Hill Monument are a milestone in the history of American engineering.²⁷

Late in life it was Maine that again played a large role in Alexander Parris's career. From the mid-1840s until his death, Parris was connected with the Portsmouth Navy Yard in Kittery as a civil engineer. His responsibility included the design of seawalls, a powder magazine, and living quarters. Previously, he had been called upon to inspect work there and in 1839, at the age of nearly sixty, descended in a diving bell to check new stonework.²⁸

In the erection of several handsome granite lighthouses and beacons, Parris left his most enduring legacy in Maine. His first executed design was Saddleback Ledge Light in Penobscot Bay, built in 1839, followed by York Ledge Beacon, also in Penobscot Bay in 1841. In 1846 Parris spent several months on Matinicus Rock supervising the construction of his twin-towered Matinicus Rock Light. The year 1848 saw two Parris-designed lights go up, Mount Desert Rock

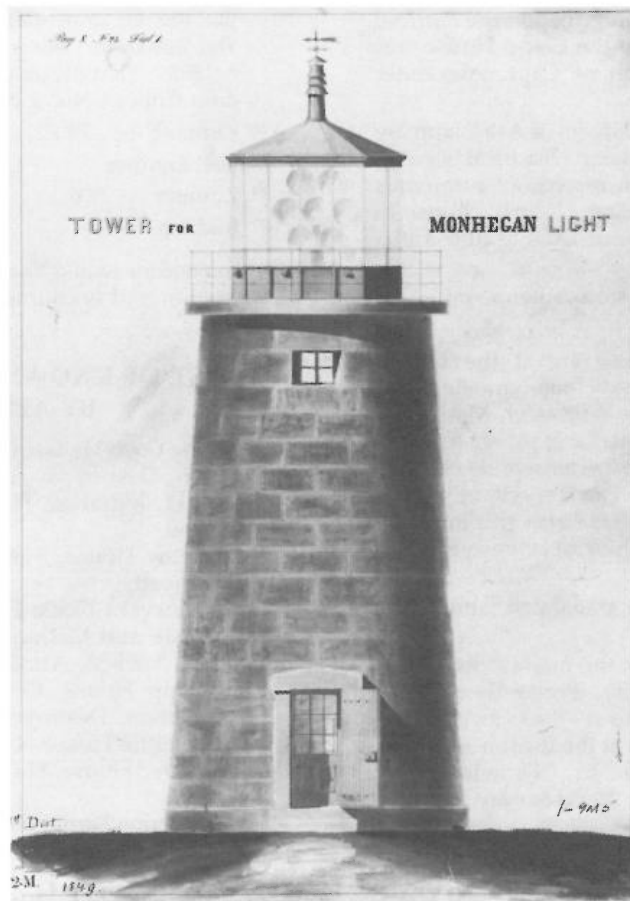


Figure 4. Elevation of Monhegan Light, drawing dated 1849, tower built 1851
(Courtesy of National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

Light and Libby Island Light. His last Maine lighthouse was Monhegan Island Light, planned in 1849.²⁹ (Figure 4) The architect's lighthouses, no less than his more conventional commissions, are notable achievements and provide a fitting conclusion to a career that spanned more than half a century, during which the State of Maine provided Alexander Parris with a wide arena for the display of his many talents.

Arthur J. Gerrier
Strawbery Banke
January, 1987

NOTES

¹ There has been some question of where Parris was born. Talbot Hamlin in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (Vol. XIV, pp. 254-55) gives Hebron, Maine, and has been widely copied. Bettina A. Norton in "The Massachusetts Bank Plans of Alexander Parris: An Essex Institute Discovery", *Essex Institute Historical Collections* (July, 1981), gives the correct place, Halifax, Massachusetts, and has been followed by Edward F. Zimmer in his dissertation cited below. This information is based on both Parris Family materials as well as the vital records of Halifax, Massachusetts.

² Edward F. Zimmer, *The Architectural Career of Alexander Parris (1780-1852)*, Vol. I, Dissertation, Boston University, 1984, pp. 3-11.

³ Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Portland. Various deeds identify Parris as "housewright", 1801-1812.

⁴ *Rules of the Portland Housewrights Association*, Portland, 1805.

⁵ Portland Selectmen Records, 1788-1807, Maine Historical Society, Portland, MISC Vol. 324 OS, contains records of payments to Parris.

⁶ James L. Garvin, "St. John's Church in Portsmouth: An Architectural Study", *Historical New Hampshire*, Fall, 1973, pp. 153-75, is the definitive work on this surviving Parris building.

⁷ Christopher P. Monkhouse, "Parris's Perusal", *Old Time New England*, October, 1967, pp. 51-59, contains an illuminating discussion of the architectural books that Parris is known to have owned and consulted throughout his career.

⁸ Alexander Parris, letter to Hon. Levi Lincoln, March 16, 1838, U.S. House Document 737.1838. This brief but important document, which gives valuable first-hand information on Parris's career to that date, was brought to my attention by Edward Zimmer.

⁹ Handbill, dated August 15, 1850, signed by William Pitt Preble, in the collection of Maine Historical Society, Portland.

¹⁰ William Goold in his invaluable "Old Houses and Their Builders" published in the *Portland Transcript*, April 6, 1892, attributes the Cobb House (among others) to Parris. This is the earliest reference I have been able to locate.

¹¹ Nathan Gould, "Two Homes of the Cumberland Club", *Portland Daily Press*, July 7, 1895.

¹² William Goold in "Old Houses..." attributes the Clapp House remodelling to Parris. A biography of Asa W. H.

Clapp, Asa Clapp's son, by Goold published in the *Portland Transcript*, April 12, 1890, states that the Clapp House was remodelled "under the supervision of Capt. Alexander Parris".

- ¹³ Miscellaneous Account Books and Ledgers of Asa Clapp are in the manuscript collection of the Maine Historical Society, Portland. Those for 1804-05 contain records of numerous payments to workmen for remodelling Clapp's "house in Back Street", chief among whom were Thomas and Rufus Washburn.
- ¹⁴ Drawing in the collection of the Boston Athenaeum.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Drawings for the Hunnewell House are at the Boston Athenaeum, while most of the Preble House drawings are at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. The Preble drawings form a remarkable set of proposals and alternate schemes that are the most extensive set of Parris renderings for any Portland building. Parris specifically states in the 1838 letter cited above, "In 1806 I was employed by the late Commodore Preble to build him an extensive dwelling at Portland, Maine."
- ¹⁷ Drawings at the Boston Athenaeum; one dated January 24, 1806.
- ¹⁸ James Deering Ledger, 1801-1819, in the manuscript collection of the Maine Historical Society, Portland, contains records of payments to Parris for a barn at "Back Cove Farm". A drawing for the barn dated 1805 is at the Boston Athenaeum. See also: Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., "Drawings Date UMP Barn to 1805, Name Architect", *Maine Sunday Telegram*, June 15, 1969.
- ¹⁹ William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders", attributes the Insurance Company Block to Parris. For a detailed history of this remarkably early row of stores treated in an "architectural" manner see William Goold, "Cumberland National Bank Building: The Old-Time Home of the Money-Lenders", unidentified newspaper clipping in the collection of Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- ²⁰ Drawings at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.
- ²¹ William Goold, "Old Houses and Their Builders", *Portland Transcript*, April 6, 1892.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Garvin, pp. 162-64.
- ²⁴ William Goold, "The Second Parish, Additional Facts in its History", *Portland Gazette*, October 3, 1888. Drawings for the church are at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.
- ²⁵ Nehemiah Cleveland and A. S. Packard, *History of Bowdoin College*, Brunswick, 1883, pp. 27, 92-3. There is some doubt

that the recommendations of Parris were actually carried out. The Bowdoin College archives record a vote of September 6, 1808, "That Alexander Parris' plan of a ground plot of Bowdoin College No. 2 be adopted" and that he be paid \$13.

²⁶ Zimmer, pp. 78-82.

²⁷ See Zimmer.

²⁸ Zimmer, p. 595.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 593-94.

The author would like to acknowledge his debt for Parris information and encouragement to Edward F. Zimmer.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ALEXANDER PARRIS

Matthew Cobb House, Congress Square, Portland, 1801, Attribution, Destroyed.
Joseph H. Ingraham House, 51 State Street, Portland, 1801, Altered.
Neal Shaw House, State Street, Portland, 1802, Attribution, Destroyed.
Hovey-Stevens Block, Free Street, Portland, 1803, Destroyed.
Maine Fire and Marine Insurance Company Block, Exchange Street, 1803-04, Attribution, Destroyed.
Asa Clapp House, Congress Street, 1804-05, Remodelling, Attribution, Destroyed.
John P. Little House, Gorham, c. 1804, Destroyed.
Robert Boyd House, 87 High Street, Portland, 1805, Attribution, Altered.
James Deering Barn, Portland (then Falmouth), 1805, Destroyed.
Richard Hunnewell House, 156 State Street, Portland, 1805, Altered.
Portland Bank, Middle Street, Portland, 1806-07, Destroyed.
Edward Preble House, Congress Street, Portland, 1806-08, Destroyed.
Southend Meeting House, Portland, 1807, Not Executed.
Campus Plan, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1808, Not Executed.
Fort Preble, South Portland (then Cape Elizabeth), 1808, Supervision, Destroyed.
Fort Scammel, Portland, 1808, Supervision, Destroyed.
Whaleback Ledge Light, Maine side of the entrance to Portsmouth Harbor, 1838, Not Executed.
Saddleback Ledge Light, East Penobscot Bay, 1839, Extant.
York Ledge Beacon, Penobscot Bay, 1841, Extant.
Portsmouth Navy Yard, Kittery, Miscellaneous Buildings, c. 1845-52, Extant.
Matinicus Rock Light, 1846-47, Altered.
Libby Island Light, 1848, Extant.
Mount Desert Rock Light, 1848, Extant.
Monhegan Island Light, 1851, Extant.
Whitehead Light, 1852, Attribution, Extant.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

The Boston Athenaeum and the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester each own a portfolio of Parris drawings from his Portland years. The National Archives in Washington, D.C. has several of Parris's drawings for Maine lighthouses.

Portrait of Alexander Parris
by W. E. Chickering
Courtesy of The Bostonian Society

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